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County inmates trade labor for liberty — Sheriff says program is easing overcrowding at jail

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A Livingston County Jail trial program that allows inmates to shave time off their sentences for performing work like mowing grass and picking up trash is helping to ease overcrowding at the lockup.

Sheriff Bob Bezotte said that “probably a dozen” inmates have earned enough good time through the program to be released early.

“We’re very pleased with the results so far,” he said. “This program is definitely helping to relieve (overcrowding).”

The program, titled SWAP, is based on a similar effort in Ottawa County. Inmates erase one day from their sentence for every four days worked.

The department has hired two retired police officers to oversee the inmates when they’re out on the work crew. The inmates eligible for the program are serving sentences for nonviolent crimes and low-end misdemeanors.

So far, inmates have cleaned county property, including picking up shell casings at the Sheriff’s Department’s gun range, as well as washing windows or picking up trash.

Pinckney Community High School Principal James Darga said the inmate work crew also has been removing and cleaning classroom furniture, as well as cleaning lockers. The efforts have helped alleviate “a lot of work” from the school’s custodial staff, which is freed up to concentrate on carpet cleaning and painting in preparation for the fall 2007 school year.

“So far, it’s been great,” Darga said. “The inmates they have provided have a positive attitude and are working very diligently.”

Darga said he hopes to use the county inmate work crew again in the future.

As for the winter months, Bezotte said he hopes the inmates will be out shoveling snow, putting down salt or doing indoor chores such as painting and cleaning carpets.

At its peak, the county inmate population fluctuated between 280 and 290 prisoners. That number seriously exceeds the Highlander Way jail’s 254-bed limit.

Today, the jail is averaging 245 to 250 inmates daily, Bezotte said.

“We’re still creeping up,” he said, noting that the population typically increases each Thursday when the county’s two Circuit Court judges handle their criminal sentencing docket.

However, Bezotte said, the SWAP program is helping to ease that overcrowding.

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